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75 Cents



According to the landlord, this building housed 12 tenants in three apartments. The town issued ten violations the week before the fire. According to town officials, the studio apartment on the first floor is illegal.



Debris from the January 22 fire that was called in at 9:01 p.m. The blaze was quickly extinguished and there were no injuries. Sixty firefighters responded to the scene.

Evacuation Required By Tenants

No Injuries in Willowdale Avenue Fire

By Christina Cronin Southard

The misuse of an extension cord found in the attic of a three-family home located on 24 Willowdale Avenue left at least 12 tenants out in the cold. At 9:01 on Jan. 22, the Port Washington Fire Department responded to a fire call at 24 Willowdale Avenue.

"Flames were coming out of the top window when we arrived," said Fire Department

Chief John O'Reilly. "The knock down of the fire was quick. The fire had burned into the roof area, the outside siding was gutted and the attic was gutted." At the time of the fire, Town of North Hempstead Building Department representatives came to the scene and determined the structure to be unsafe. It is unclear how many people were in the house at the time of the fire.

The landlord said that no one was in the building at the time of the fire. However, two onlookers at the scene who did not wish to be identified said that about 20 people were evacuated from the site.

The owner of the building had been issued ten violations on the structure just the week before on Jan. 16, according to building inspector Barry DeFeria. He had

observed a light in the attic and inspected the property the next day. Port Washington resident Maria Mededdu, who has owned the building since 1972, stated she has never rented the third floor attic to any tenants. She said that she has had trouble in

the past with tenants subletting the attic space.

According to town officials, the building is a pre-existing, non-conforming two family house with a detached garage

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Willowdale Fire

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with one legal apartment. In reality, the site is a three-family with another two-apartments in what was once the garage. According to town officials, Mededdu was taken into court in the summer of 1995, fined and given the directive to comply with the building regulations. She has not complied.

Town Supervisor May Newburger stated, "This landlord's refusal to obey a court of law shows a blatant disregard for the safety of her tenants and for the quality of life in our neighborhoods."

Mededdu said that the building has had the same number of apartments since she became part owner of the property in 1972. "When my brother, Mario Moroccu, died in 1972, he lived in the garage apartment," she said. She then owned the property with two other brothers, Antonio and Raymond. In 1989, Mededdu became the sole owner of the property. The structure has two apartments on the first floor and one on the second floor. The studio apartment that faces the street is illegal. "It used to be a *Newsday* office. My brother converted it to a studio sometime between 1965 and 1972," said Mededdu. Although she did not produce the deed, she said it provided for the three apartments at 24 Willowdale and two additional apartments in the former garage at 24 B.

Mededdu said she has invested about \$50,000 in the building since 1989 installing new bathrooms, kitchens, windows, secured doors and locks. In 1994, she installed a new hot water heater. By her own account, an extended family of five people lived in the second floor apartment, a nuclear family of five in the first floor rear apartment and two tenants lived

in the front studio.

Mededdu said they visited the site several times a week to check on her tenants to ensure that they were not subletting to illegal tenants. She said that in 1995, when there was evidence that the second floor tenant was subletting the attic, she had him evicted. She added that in 1994, she evicted another tenant in the first floor rear apartment because they sublet one room to an additional seven tenants. "I don't have to wait for an inspector to tell me I have too many people," she said. "When the place was a dump, no inspectors ever came around. Now that I have improved the building they are all over me," she said.

Town officials reported that they have been issuing summonses for two years. "The building is boarded up...apparently less than 50 percent is destroyed...If more than 50 percent was destroyed, the building would no longer conform to code even if there were variances or grandfathering in the past...Whatever happens to the building, all new electrical wiring must be installed," stated a building department report. "The building department will diligently monitor all plans closely, particularly making sure that all new electrical wiring meets safety standards."

"The fire was not caused from any neglect on my part," said Mededdu.

The Town of North Hempstead instituted a Rental Registration Law last year that calls for landlords to file the number of tenants residing in any rental properties. Permits are currently being issued for rental properties with four or fewer units. Failure to comply results in a punitive fining procedure.